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RUEAHLC/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC

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SUBJECT: Consular Section Outreach on SAO Procedures

REF: 29-MAY-2009 EAP Press Guidance

¶1. Summary: U.S. Consulate Shenyang's SAO officer met with students, professors, and company executives at various institutions and enterprises in Northeast China in an effort to help them prepare adequately for the visa interview. The institutions and enterprises were chosen for their large numbers of visa applicants and high percentages of applicants requiring Mantis SAOs. Outreach materials were adapted from the May 29, 2009 press guidance regarding changes to the Visas Mantis program (Reftel). Conoff and LES assistant fielded general questions about the B1/B2 and J-1 categories of nonimmigrant visas and received feedback on the process. End summary.

¶2. On November 24-27, 2009, Conoff conducted a series of outreach events at businesses and universities in Harbin, Shenyang, and Changchun. Since most prior outreach events were focused on the F-1 student visa, these talks were primarily directed toward a J-1 and B1/B2 audience. The universities and research institutions that were visited send many professors and directors to the U.S. every year, either for research or educational exchange purposes. The majority of these professors and directors are subject to the Mantis SAO, due to their backgrounds and/or purpose of travel. Therefore, Conoff carefully laid out the validity periods of the various types of clearances and explained the Citic Bank drop-box procedure, in an effort to ensure that the applicants understood how they could waive the interview or avoid being processed for a new Mantis SAO. During each of these talks, Conoff stressed the importance of applying early, keeping your visa valid, and bringing the necessary documents to the visa interview.

¶3. The professors and company directors were pleased with the shorter waiting times, which are currently around 3-4 weeks for most visa classes; at the same time last year, the average processing times were 2-3 months. Several expressed the need for clearer guidance on the validity periods of the clearances and the relationship between the SAO process and purpose of travel and background of the applicant. On the latter point, Conoff advised that a number of factors contribute to the decision-making process, and reiterated the guidance to apply early and bring all related documents.

¶4. Comment: This is the first time that the Consular Section has conducted outreach directed toward this type of audience. The warm receptions we received and the number of thought-provoking questions exceeded our expectations and testified to the need for this type of outreach in the future. We succeeded in informing many educators and businessmen about the visa application process, and in turn were able to expand our contact base in the Consular district. If you would like to use or adapt our outreach materials, please contact ShenyangSAO@state.gov.

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